

Churches have newsletters to communicate their story to members and visitors. The newsletter brings news that inspires, informs, educates and evangelizes in a format that its producers hope will be appealing enough to be read.

History and Background

The letters of Paul to Christ's followers may be looked at as the earliest Christian church newsletters. Written by a beloved leader and teacher, the letters were passed from hand to hand among growing, battling, loving, all-too-human communities. He wrote to encourage, teach, inspire and instruct them in the faith and to help them keep in touch with one another. Since that time, pastors and leaders have used various forms of letters for the same purposes.

Common Practices

Church newsletters may be produced by one person or by a committee. Often the pastor and church office secretary produce the newsletter.

Newsletters range from a single sheet to multicolored, multi-paged publications. They are distributed occasionally or on a weekly or monthly schedule. Some are interesting, even to a stranger. On the other hand, some look good and are still uninteresting. Each newsletter says something about the church and its mission--whether accurate or not.

Some churches give a great deal of space to the pastor, who may use the newsletter to reach absent members. Some newsletters regularly include a financial report, while others never mention money. The emphasis may be inspirational material or news. Often the newsletter is a place to introduce new programs and to provide calendars or reminders of upcoming events.

Responsibilities

Your responsibilities may include deciding the purpose of the newsletter and the type of material that will be included. The newsletter may focus on:

- **Inspiration**, with meditations, essays, poetry, quotations and thoughts from the pastor and members and friends of the congregation.
- **Information**, with news of special groups (youth, women's and men's, committees and boards), individuals (births, weddings, deaths, good news, tragedies, honors and sorrows), special mission projects (seminary, children's home, soup kitchen and Heifer Project), announcements of needs and special opportunities, and official actions of the church and future events.
- **Evangelism**, with information about the church's ministry and mission for people outside the church. To attract others to your church, be sure to put visitors on

the mailing list, identify the church clearly and give the church's phone number and pastor's name. Avoid abbreviations and other "inside information" not easily understood by outsiders.

- **Education**, with meditations on scripture, skill sharing by church members, theological reflection, book and movie reviews, articles on church history or denominational projects, background on an upcoming vote, or pros and cons of an issue.

If your newsletter attempts to do all these things, you'll need to decide which focus to emphasize.

- Setting a production and mailing schedule or working within a schedule already set. (Monthly newsletters seem to work best.)
- Assigning writing. You may or may not want to attend all governing board meetings yourself. You probably will want others to contribute. They may interview members about their skills or ministries or report for committees or the youth group. You may assign certain regular features to a single writer, or rotate. You will probably want to assign special features, such as interviewing new members, reporting on events, book reviews, and so on. Make sure the writers know when and where the material is due, and in what format or program.
- Writing or editing the material so that it is clear, simple and brief, using good grammar and inclusive language. Give credit to all sources

and bylines to reporters.

- Determining how the newsletter will be reproduced. Photocopying or offset printing are both possibilities. Today it is most common for the newsletter to be set-up on a word processing or publishing computer program, printed and copied. Clip art is readily available to suit your content. The capacity of the photocopier may determine the size of the paper. Budget and postal requirements may also influence the decision.
- Preparing and proofreading the final copy. A computer word processing or desktop publishing program, are most commonly used, but in the event you must use a typewriter, it should make a clean, firm image with type large enough for easy reading. From among the many fonts available for your computer, those with serifs (not "sans serif") are more easily read. (These have small horizontal marks at the top and bottom of letters, which help guide the eye.)
- Setting up columns rather than typing across the page also aids reading, as do ample margins and space between articles.
- Adding headlines and illustrations. Headlines should be eye catching but not too cute. Try to include a noun and a present- or future-tense verb in each.
- Overseeing the photocopying or printing of the newsletter. Use the best recycled paper you can

reasonably afford. Arrange for large-print or Braille editions for people with visual impairments.

- Addressing and affixing labels. Computerized mailing lists are easily updated and most efficient.
- Arranging for all or selected parts of your newsletter to be available on your church's website, if you have one.
- Mailing the newsletter. Get information from the post office about mailing possibilities and requirements, including a non-profit bulk mail rate.
- Keeping the mailing list up-to-date. Include the news media, visitors, supporters and your association and/or conference office.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Ability to get things done and follow-through.
- Curiosity and enthusiasm about people and about the church.
- Knowledge of the church and its members.
- A sense of what is newsworthy.
- Respect and support from the pastor and lay leaders.
- Imagination.
- Ability to write clearly, simply and concisely.
- Enjoyment of working with words.
- Layout skills or graphics experience or at least a sense of what makes a page look good.

- Sensitivity to people's feelings and interests.
- Accuracy in details.
- Reporting and interviewing skills.
- Computer layout and design ability.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Read other church newsletters.
- Try to analyze the layout of publications that appeal to you.
- Observe headlines in newspapers and practice writing them.
- Subscribe to **United Church News**, the national newspaper of the United Church of Christ, available from the Proclamation, Identity and Communications Ministry Team, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115 or on www.ucc.org.
- Review promotional materials from the various settings of the United Church of Christ (national, conference, association, neighboring churches) and ecumenical groups.
- For help in writing use **The Practical Stylist** by Sheridan Baker (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), **Writing to be Read** by Ken Macrorie (Portsmouth, NH: Boyton Cook Publishers, 1984) and **The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing** by Casey Miller and Kate Swift (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). Keep a thesaurus and a dictionary handy.
- Attend workshops and seminars sponsored by your association or conference, ecumenical groups or colleges and universities on writing and communication as well as newsletter production.
- Keep files of clippings from magazines, other newsletters and books. If you wish to use even a short quotation, get permission from the publisher.
- Talk with writers, editors and graphic experts.
- Ask printers for advice as well as a bid on the project.
- Consider a qualified person to prepare the newsletter with a desktop publishing program.
- Ask for an assistant editor or committee to help you.
- Talk regularly with the pastor about the message the newsletter is communicating and possibilities for upcoming articles.
- Order these inexpensive resources on newsletter production: **Telling Your Story with Newsletters, Telling Your Story with Desktop Publishing, Rightful Use and Religious Public Relations Handbook**, all from the Proclamation, Identity and Communication Ministry Team.
- Check with your Conference Resource Center for suggestions and guides to newsletter production.

Questions

- How can you make the church newsletter a tool for outreach and nurture? Consider content, layout and method of distribution.
- Are there people of all ages in your church who can be identified and employed as reporters and information gatherers? Ask people to check publications coming to the church, too, including newsletters that come to the pastor, for ideas.
- Stay connected to information sources such as the United Church of Christ website, www.ucc.org. The website includes stories from the Religion News Service and UCC News.
- Are there places in the community where the newsletter could be placed, such as apartment house lobbies, hospital waiting rooms, senior-citizen centers or student residences? Are you sending your newsletter to your conference or national offices that may be interested in particular articles? Introduce yourself to the community and your church by letting them know the interesting things you are doing.